Economy and the Riches of the Poor

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Dr Majid Rahmena has spent much of his career thinking about poverty. By his own admission, there was a time when the Iranian scholar was overwhelmed by the issue of poverty and his inability to offer any new insights on the topic. His awakening to a new, more radical view of poverty and the poor began on the streets of Calcutta.

"It was here, when I went deeper with people who had worked with [the poor of Calcutta] that I began to feel shameful of the idea that I would think of these people, who were so creative and so imaginative in dealing with their problems, as poor and that we were the rich," he states.

For most of his working life, Dr Rahnema had always assumed that by definition "the poor were poor." By using the proper economic levers to better manage scarce resources, he believed that development experts, like himself, "could make their situation better."

His experience in Calcutta launched him on a personal journey that would see him reject these two widely held assumptions as irrelevant.

"The societies and people we call poor," Dr Rahnema states, "have to be studied and examined and approached in terms other than this negativity which we call poverty. Their riches are in their relations with one another, in the types of things that can be done together, and in their relationship with nature. Of course, the societies we call poor did not produce many of the consumer goods or gadgets which today we call riches."

Dr Rahnema asserts that many of the societies labelled as poor, in fact, simply have a different concept of riches. Poverty, like riches, is a social construct deeply imbedded within cultural perceptions.

Many of the current views on poverty, he states, were perpetuated by colonialism and, later, by development efforts. Proponents of both these systems made a fundamental error when "they began to consider societies outside of their network of relations."

Each system or society builds its own network of relations to meet its goals and, in the process, creates its own sense of value, of both rich and poor. According to Dr Rahnema,"riches or things have no value in themselves. Value is attributed to something through a nexus of relations and culture-specific perceptions of needs or of poverty. In Persian, for example, a poor person is one who has nobody to look after him or her."

The proponents of economic development saw it as a way to transform the scarcity they witnessed and labelled as poverty into abundance. But economic development has had the opposite effect — scarcity is built into the system .

"A modern person is one with unlimited needs, " says Dr Rahnema." And the economy claims that it can provide such a person with the unlimited means he or she needs to satisfy them."

The problem is that "the creation of needs goes much faster and in a more secure way than the creation of resources needed to satisfy those needs. What you have at the top of the echelon is a small group of individuals who can satisfy those needs and a greater mass of people who can never be satisfied."

According to Dr Rahnema, the whole notion of a society organized around scarcity runs counter to the world view held in the past and still found among more traditional societies. They consider themselves as part of an abundant whole. In their view, "a human being was a person who had to learn the art of living with necessity."

The dominant view of economic development as the key to poverty alleviation has, in many ways, put the cart before the horse. Dr Rahnema points to Brazil and the United Sates as examples. The former is a country with areas of excessively high infant mortality and hunger despite the fact it is the world's leading producer and exporter of protein. The United States is the global economic powerhouse, yet its own government statistics show 30-40 million people living below the federally established poverty line.

"It is not because you have more and create more that you change the picture," says Dr Rahnema.

When asked if he sees a solution to poverty, he responds: "That is the wrong question, for the simple reason that poverty does not have the same meaning for all. There are some for whom poverty is a blessing, not a problem. It is a calamity, however, for the modern destitute whose entire mode of life and ways of preserving it has been destroyed in the name of economic progress. Questions need to be clear and more directed "

He returns to Calcutta to illustrate his point."The people in Calcutta, who have only a couple of metres on which to live, find their own solutions because they know exactly what questions [they need answered]"

Whereas people are regarded as poor when they have little food, shelter, clothing, or education, Dr Rahnema would pose a series of questions to elicit answers that suggest solutions. For example, what does society have to do to ensure that people have access to education, health care, and shelter?

Questions need to be more specific, more concrete, and grounded in the reality of those we seek to help. In the final analysis though, he believes that changing the entrenched views on the poor and poverty will prove very difficult. To do so, we must examine the beliefs and values that underpin the dominant social and economic models in operation today. According to Dr Rahnema,"the relevant questions we avoid, because those questions mean a much greater seriousness and perhaps need total radical approaches to the way we live and the society we are — and we don't want to question that."

About Dr Rahnema

Majid RAHNEMA was born in Tehran, Iran. A career diplomat, he served as that country's Ambassador to the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN), for 10 successive years (1962–1972). He was the UN Commissioner to Rwanda (to supervise the elections and the referendum held in 1960), Chairman of the Fourth Committee (1965), and Vice-President of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization(UNESCO) from 1965 to 1967. He also

served as a member of the Executive Board of UNESCO (1974–78), an appointed member of the Committee of 24 for the Restructuring of the UN (1974), and a member of the United Nations University Council (1974-1980). After leaving his position with the governemnt of Iran, he directed an innovative participatory and integrated development project that covered 100 villages in Luristan, Iran. He also created the Iranian Institute for Endogenous Development Studies.

In 1979, he joined the United Nations Organization, first as the representative of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in Mali (1979–1982) and later as the UNDP Special Advisor for Grassroots and NGO Matters (1982-85). From 1985 to 1992 , he was a Visiting Professor at the University of California at Berkeley. He now teaches "Post-Development" and "Poverty" courses at Pitzer College.

Dr Rahnema was also a Pearson Fellow at IDRC from March, 1991 to July, 1992

Among the books he has published, in English or French, are:

- Humanisme en voie de développement, Teheran, 1969
- Apprendre à être (Learning to Be), in collaboration with Edgar Faure and others, Paris: UNESCO/Fayard, 1971
- Global Poverty, A Pauperizing Myth, Montreal, Interculture, 1991
- Le Nord Perdu, (with Gilbert Rist and Gustavo Esteva), Lausanne: Editions d'En-bas, 1992
- The Post-Development Reader, London: Zed Books, 1997